

Tucson Citizen

Guest Opinion: Stuck in the 1950s, transportation policy needs to catch up

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Transportation in America was once an engine of progress and an inspiration.

Railroads opened the West, and automobiles brought new mobility for a footloose nation after World War II.

Nowadays, getting around is a source of more problems than solutions.

Traffic delays waste an average of 38 hours a year for urban commuters - almost an entire workweek and more than twice as much as in 1985.

The major source of our addiction to expensive foreign oil, transportation consumes 2 out of every 3 barrels and is the fastest-growing source of global warming pollution.

Oil costing \$130-plus a barrel and crumbling infrastructure are drags on the economy.

And the once-flush federal transportation trust fund and many of its state counterparts are forecast to run out of money in the next two years.

Since fulfilling President Eisenhower's 1956 vision of an interstate system

to link our major cities, transportation policy has stumbled on without a clear purpose.

Federal transportation spending has become little more than a giant public works program.

In the absence of a defined strategy, individual success of legislators is often judged by how many federal dollars are brought home, while the nation's infrastructure has largely deteriorated.

To keep our nation moving efficiently, the federal government must ensure dedicated funding and hold states accountable for maintaining roadways.

Maintenance now is left almost entirely up to states, competing with popular programs for scarce dollars and typically losing out to expensive projects that offer big headlines and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Federal transportation funds also continue to be distributed through the false assumption that more is better when it comes to roadways.

States receive highway funds based on three outdated criteria: the previous year's gasoline consumption, lane-miles of federal highways and the previous year's vehicle miles traveled.

More driving, in other words, garners more federal dollars.

States that do their part to reduce America's oil dependence and global warming pollution would reduce growth of these measures and would lose out on federal dollars.

Our government should reward states and localities that reduce gas consumption and miles driven by instead emphasizing public transportation.

Light rail, rapid bus transit, commuter rail, high-speed intercity rail and other forms of public transit are more energy efficient and encourage

development patterns that require less driving.

The Arizona PIRG Education Fund found that public transit saved 3.4 billion gallons of oil in 2006. This translated into \$9 billion saved at the pump and prevented 26 million tons of global warming emissions.

Public transit trips have been growing faster than auto miles or population since 1995. Likewise, 53 percent of Americans tell pollsters they would like to take more public transportation if it is available near where they live and work.

Giving people the transportation choices they want will require Congress to make changes.

Since 1956, federal, state and local governments have spent nine times more on highway subsidies than on public transportation.

This ratio has improved, but not fast enough. And now President Bush's 2009 budget would take us back in time, cutting transit money by \$200 million, slashing Amtrak's budget by 40 percent and diverting \$3.2 billion from the federal transit account to highways.

Such cuts would move the country in exactly the wrong direction.

Congress will have a golden opportunity when the current transportation authorization bill expires next year.

Public leaders must recognize that our transportation problems stem from a lack of purpose. They must rewrite policy to address contemporary problems of rapidly aging infrastructure, urban congestion, oil dependence and an overheating planet.

Instead of simply "reauthorizing" the transportation act with higher spending, Congress must reinvent how it funds transportation.

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